

Mary

By Benjamin Panulo

I first heard about the woman I will refer to as Mary from James Koloviko, a teacher friend of mine. James was involved in evangelism in Malawi in the late nineties while he studied at a teacher training college in the city of Blantyre. James first met this woman during one of his evangelism trips. He visited her village with a group of American preachers who were preaching the Gospel around the country. According to James, Mary gave her life to Christ at the end of one of these meetings.

Mary's conversion was remarkable because of the fact that she had made her living selling Kachaso, a local alcoholic brew, before the arrival of the evangelists. The popularity of her brew had made her one of the wealthiest people in her village. She had a large house, and it was in the compound of this house that people gathered several times every week to partake of her brew. Mary's Kachaso business had become such an integral part of village life that when it was announced that she would no longer make Kachaso because of her newfound faith, a lot of people doubted her commitment. Mary held on to her decision even after threats and beatings from her husband who had largely depended on the income from the Kachaso business.

James left Mary's village with the evangelists at the end of two weeks and returned to the teacher college where he eventually graduated and found a job at a secondary school in Blantyre. He was not to hear from Mary again until several years later when he visited her at the Queen Elizabeth government hospital in Blantyre. On first visiting her, he found that she had lost a great deal of weight and was obviously very ill. Nevertheless, she was overjoyed to see him and was eager to tell him about the happenings in her village. She proudly informed him that her compound, which had formerly been used for the sale of Kachaso, was now used as a meeting place for worship. She then proudly exhibited her Bible, which she kept close to her at all times. She had finally learned how to read after a long struggle and could read the word of God for herself.

Over the course of his visits, James learnt the rest of Mary's remarkable story. After the evangelists had left, Mary had struggled to make a living selling vegetables and fruits to passing motorists. This new business had not been as successful as Kachaso, but Mary had been happy just to make a living. She had also started holding prayer meetings at her house with some of the people who had given their lives to Christ during the evangelists' meetings. Her husband was not too pleased about these meetings but did nothing to prevent them. Mary was hopeful that her husband would also accept Christ in time, but he suddenly became ill and died. The death of her husband was a major blow, and what followed next left Mary in even deeper despair.

As was usual in the rural areas of Malawi at the time, her husband's relatives grabbed all of her property and left her with virtually nothing. She was also told to leave her house and threatened with violence if she failed to do so. Mary was at a loss as to where she would go next since she had no relatives of her own. It was only through the kindness of one of her neighbors, who also attended Mary's prayer meetings, that Mary and her daughter found themselves living in a small shack on this neighbor's property.

Mary lived in this shack with her daughter for some time without experiencing any problems from her in-laws. But they soon realized that Mary had no intention of leaving the village and they began to make trouble for her. Her brother-in-law, who was now occupying her old house, came to see her several times to warn her against remaining in the village.

As these threats became more menacing, Mary began a desperate search for a new place to live. She left early every morning and would walk long distances to villages in the surrounding area looking for a place to rent. She returned every evening disappointed. She was also making very little from her new business and was forced several times to depend on her hostesses' charity. Mary continued holding meetings in her new home despite these disappointing occurrences, believing that God would somehow help her out of her predicament. Her in-laws, frustrated that all their efforts to force Mary out of the village were bearing no fruit, soon adopted a new tactic.

One evening Mary was outside the shack preparing supper when she saw her daughter running toward her crying. Several children chanted as they followed behind. At first Mary could not hear what the children were chanting. When she finally heard, a feeling of pure dread came over her. The children were chanting, "*mfiti mfiti mfiti*," the word for "witch" in the local language. It seemed that her relatives had started spreading rumors that Mary was a witch and that she had killed her husband through witchcraft. This is why the other children were also calling her daughter a witch.

The next couple of weeks were difficult for Mary. She knew that the people in her village were superstitious. Even if they did not really believe the rumors that she was a witch, they would still regard her with suspicion. She also knew that her daughter would find it impossible to get playmates since the other children would be afraid to play with someone suspected of witchcraft. The worst part though, was that with the rumors of witchcraft, there was now a greater chance of Mary and her daughter being exposed to violence. Mary had heard of suspected witches' houses being burnt to the ground. Every night she went to bed, she was fearful that somebody would try to set her house on fire.

It was in this state of fear that she heard a knock on her door one night. She immediately decided that she would not answer and prayed that whoever was at her door would soon go away. The knocking on the door continued. With a pounding heart, Mary finally opened it. Her heart immediately sank when she saw her brother-in-law. Mary immediately braced herself for the threats that usually came with his visits, but to her surprise, he politely asked for permission to enter.

The biggest surprise, though, was that instead of threatening Mary as he had done on previous occasions, he began to ask for forgiveness. He explained how he had been surprised to hear singing while passing by her shack one evening a few months before. He had taken it for granted that Mary would give up her newfound belief in God after her husband's death and the loss of all her property. The fact that she was still capable of singing had aroused his curiosity so much that he had crept closer to the shack to hear what was going on inside. What he had heard had surprised him even more. Not only was Mary praising God, but also praying for her enemies. This had surprised him so much, and he had gone home in deep thought. How could she pray for him after everything he had done? Why was she not full of hatred? These and other questions

had weighed heavily on his mind that night. He had secretly listened outside Mary's shack several times after this. He noticed that no matter how bad things were, Mary still remained steadfast to her belief in God. He had finally decided to visit her to find out why she continued to believe in God despite everything that had happened.

A few weeks later, he gave his life to Christ, Mary gladly informed James. He hopes to become a pastor one day.

Mary later died at Queen Elizabeth hospital in 2003. Her brother-in-law was by her side praying for her until the end.